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New Materialist Philosophy

## On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy

**Kyla Wazana Tompkins**

**ABSTRACT** Kyla Wazana Tompkins questions the structures informing claims of newness posed by discussions of "New Materialism." She discusses the troubling ways in which these discourses, in turning toward the post- or non-human, can ironically reinforce assumptions about a universal human subject and elide considerations of gender, race, and power.

It proves somewhat difficult to give a concise outline of this field that is called New Materialism. This is perhaps because the putative "newness" of the field is in fact a resurrection of an old body of thinking that reaches back several centuries to Spinozan

monism and perhaps also because after over a decade of scholarship, this is a field that still seems speculative, emergent, and contestatory.<sup>1</sup> What has been most useful and “new” about the New Materialism, in terms of its relevance to critical race, queer, feminist, socialist, and other modes of minoritarian and left thought, including the “old” materialism, is most definitely just beginning to take shape.

What I will do in this short and necessarily incomplete essay is briefly discuss some of the core tenets of the New Materialism; outline what I see as some of the most useful contributions that the New Materialism has made to my own work and perhaps to minoritarian and left work in general; and then point to some of the issues I see with the New Materialism today.

At its heart, the New Materialism explores the potentially actant qualities of the material and non-human world—New Materialism then is interested in relations between things, objects, phenomena, materialities, and physical bodies, as well as the relations between those things (things with each other) and humans (humans with things). New Materialism also considers the thingness of the human, the materiality of human bodies, and explores consciousness, feeling, affect, and other circulatory and shared social phenomena as they rise out of the substance of the world. Therefore, much New Materialist thought thinks through and with the biological and chemical make-up of the neurological body itself in relation to an increasingly toxic but always-chemical world.

Given these interests, the New Materialism is also interested in speculating about a world in which the human subject is not centered, or even central. The timeliness of this concern, for a species quickly headed towards and in fact already mired in ecological disaster and multiple-species genocide, cannot be over-emphasized. In some New Materialist thinking, particularly the strains of queer of color critique rethinking the relationship between racialized humans and the animal, the current planetary crisis is above all a consequence of the human-centered logic that underlies modern Christological racial capitalism, a logic that produces categories of beings designated as animal or object, in the name of extracting value and labor-energy.

There are, naturally, several schools, lines, and overlapping modalities of New Materialist thought. Working in a line of thought mostly opposed to those emerging from queer of color critique, feminist science studies, and animal studies, is Object Oriented Ontology, which is committed to thinking through the non-relational autonomy of the object world.<sup>2</sup> Largely indifferent if not hostile to work that considers objecthood itself as a historical category with roots in larger political systems like racial capitalism, biopolitics, or colonialism, OOO (as Object Oriented Ontology is often referred to) seeks to theorize object life in its most radically non-relational forms; it is thus committed to a sense of the world, or perhaps the real, as existing prior to, or more importantly, beyond, representational systems such as language. In the OOO conversation, matter can never be apprehended as such: it comes into legibility only as form. In this way, OOO is extraneous to the conversations taking place in feminist, queer, and critical race theory, most of which take as true the idea that the relationship between discursivity and materiality is circular and, in Karen Barad’s terms, intra-active.<sup>3</sup>

Adjacent to, but deeply influenced by New Materialist thought, particularly Spinozan ideas of affect, are the fields of media studies that think through a biological, autonomic, and presocial component to human feeling.<sup>4</sup> Intersecting with work in that field as well as critical science studies, a field long shaped if not underwritten by feminist science studies, New Materialist affect and media studies imagines the material world as always and already shaping thought.<sup>5</sup> Such correlationist work—understanding correlationism via Meillassoux here as a circular relationship between perception and world—explores the

shared and social quality of feeling as it is reshaped by media, electronic communication, and various forms of surveillance as they take shape under new regimes of capital.<sup>6</sup> This latter school, particularly when in conversation with what we might call old materialism—that is Marxist and anti-capitalist critiques of liberalism, neoliberalism, and globalization—most usefully offers new inroads into understanding new societies of surveillance and control as they have reshaped politics, biopolitics, and what some call microbiopolitics.

There are reasons to be suspicious of the New Materialism, as indeed there are reasons to be suspicious of any intellectual movement that calls itself “new”—because of course we need to always ask: what is the heroic narrative that its putative “newness” seeks to instantiate? A non-human centered ontology and ethics; a sense of the biological and non-biological world as vital and alive; an idea of the body as having a life and conversation of its own, with itself; and, most centrally and crucially, the idea that planetary life should, must be, and will be at the determinative center of political world-making: these are epistemologies and ontologies that can hardly be said to have recently been invented but rather are familiar to, among others, First Nations and Indigenous peoples; to those humans who have never been quite human enough as explored, for instance, in postcolonial and revolutionary black thought; to some strands of feminist thinking, for instance, de Beauvoir’s thinking about the objecthood of women; and to other non-Western medical and spiritual modalities.<sup>7</sup>

And in fact, as a nineteenth centuryist, I can say definitely that not much of the thinking about the active life of matter and the material world, in my research interests on food, drink, and narcotics, seems very surprising: it is precisely in these terms that these substances have been described historically. I want to make clear then that I, alongside many others, worry and am cynical about how the non-white or otherwise minoritarian subjects and indeed history itself, haunt the edges of certain veins within New Materialist thought, sometimes explicitly as the cause of previous intellectual movements that undermine or critique facticity in favor of discourse and sometimes subtly when minoritarian life appears as the ideologically undertheorized yet exemplary object of the New Materialism itself.

It is of deep concern to me how much New Materialism, particularly in Object Oriented Ontology, cannot deal with race; how it ignores or misreads the work of feminist and queer theory; and how the move to a kind of ontology-centered hermeneutic suppresses the question and problem of difference. Here I am particularly worried by the ongoing citation of “the power of language” or “representationalism” as a problem that is corrected by new materialism, as well as worried by loose and vague references to “identitarian thinking” or “identity politics” as a failure to ground and create productive political thought.<sup>8</sup>

It is, however, alongside newer work in the field of American Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Queer Theory that I believe that the so-called New Materialist thought is and can profitably be put to work alongside those projects that have so far been absent. Some examples:

1. The undoing of the subject and of the category of the human. Here I am thinking of the centrality of black feminist and postcolonial thought following Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter that seeks to reorient western epistemologies from the point of view of those who have never been human. Alexander Weheliye’s recent work in *Habeas Viscus*, which takes up Spillers’s thought to theorize from the rich social space of the enfleshed and putatively pre-social, has been helpful to me; also, and obviously, Mel Chen’s work in *Animacies*.<sup>9</sup>

2. The interrogation of mythologies of liberal personhood and sovereign agency by foregrounding the human body's autonomic "prior-ness" to the social world allows for new avenues of political critique; however, dissolving the atomic nature of the self by thinking through bodily affect as collective and social is a political move towards collectivization and distributive agency that should be key. Problematic but still useful work by Nigel Thrift and Kathleen Stewart has helped me here, as has Lauren Berlant's thinking about the genre and the event; Jafari Allen's extension of Audre Lorde's "The Uses of The Erotic" has also been important.<sup>10</sup>
3. A reckoning with planetary thought and the material world—ecological thinking that looks at the interdependence of species with each other, that is observant and attentive to the ways that material becoming is a way of theorizing politics in and of itself. Work in science and technology studies is critical but also helpful is new work that attends to the ecological life of the plantation, to the environmental pre-history of the history of sexuality.
4. Against representation. New Materialist thought can be a tool for analyzing the workings of resistance, power, and capital in the age of surveillance; the best of New Materialist thought examines structures of feeling and offers an analytic of the ways in which power works to move us into a deeper understanding of the micro-workings of biopolitics in the contemporary mediatized political era. That is, New Materialist thought works profitably with Marxist critique to see how politics traffics in mass feeling, and how mass feeling might in turn be harnessed to effect politics.


This is not an exhaustive list or description; it is certainly only a personal and preliminary gesture towards thinking with this field. I have left out trans and disability theory's centrality to posthuman and inhumanist thought; I have not touched on surface reading nor on the Latourian turn. Indeed, as I said at the beginning of this piece, it proves impossible to narrow New Materialist thinking down to only a few strains. However, I would end with one more provocation, which I take from my ongoing conversation with Dana Luciano's work on geology, time, and biopolitics in the nineteenth-century, and which emerges in my own scholarship in my new work on aesthetics, genre, and affect during and following the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.


In a recent interview, Luciano says that "The most compelling contribution of the new materialisms is not conceptual or analytic, strictly speaking, but sensory. The attempt to attend to the force of liveliness of matter will entail not just a reawakening or redirection of critical attention, but a reorganizing of the senses, departing from the limitations of the Aristotelian model...In re/awakening criticism to alternate sensory dimensions, it holds the potential to expand and enliven—though crucially, not to replace—'old' (historical) materialisms."<sup>11</sup> I find Luciano's provocation—as indeed I find all of her work—to be the most intellectually exciting reading of New Materialism's critical potential. In following Rancière's invitation to direct our attention to the ordering of sense and sensibility within the frame of politics, Luciano's current work points to a critical site wherein the New Materialism might open up into other, more productive, analytics. The attention to the interface between the human and the nonhuman as it yields to and undoes human sensory organization, suggests that New Materialist thinking must necessarily engage radical interdisciplinarity; this in turn brings us back to the provocations of left, feminist, queer, and critical race theory, whose anti-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary energies continue to retain a link with the political movements that produced them.

[Editors' note: Responses to this piece by Chad Shomura ("[Exploring the Promise of New Materialisms](#)") and Michelle N. Huang ("[Rematerializations of Race](#)") are published in *Lateral* 6.1 (Spring 2017), with a [response by Tompkins](#).]

## Notes

1. See Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza, *Ethics* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006). [↗](#)
2. A small sampling: Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Ropley, UK: John Hunt Publishing, 2010); Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, Or What It's Like to Be A Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011); Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After The End of The World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). [↗](#)
3. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and The Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). [↗](#)
4. See Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), and more recently, *The Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015). Also Steven Shavero, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Ropley, UK: Zero Books, 2010) and *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). [↗](#)
5. See such critical works in Feminist Science Studies as Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Sarah S. Richardson, *Sex Itself: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); the previously-mentioned Karen Barad; Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (London: Polity Press, 2013); Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology and the Mutations of Desire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004). [↗](#)
6. The primary critic of correlationism is Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Continuum, 2009). One insight into the overlaps and divergences between feminist new materialism and the Object Oriented Ontology's hostility to what it terms "correlationism" worth consulting is Rebekah Sheldon's "Form/Matter/Chora: Object-Oriented Ontology and Feminist New Materialism," in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 193-222. [↗](#)
7. For a more thorough discussion of these issues and interventions see Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Review: Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2013), 669-685. [↗](#)
8. See for instance the introduction to Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). [↗](#)
9. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in "Culture and Counteremory: The "American" Connection," special issue, *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer, 1987): 64-81; Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337; and more recently, Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). See also Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). [↗](#)
10. Brian Massumi's work is key here as well as Erin Manning's work on movement, see Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University

of Minnesota Press, 2006) and *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009); Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Jafari S. Allen, *Venceremos?: The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); and Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 2007), 53-59. 

11. See Cécile Roudeau, "How the Earth Feels: A Conversation with Dana Luciano," *Transatlantica* 1 (2015), accessed May 22, 2016, <http://transatlantica.revues.org/7362>. See also Dana Luciano, "The Inhuman Anthropocene," *Avidly: A Channel of the Los Angeles Review of Books* March 22, 2015, accessed May 22, 2016, <http://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2015/03/22/the-inhuman-anthropocene/>. 

 [Bio](#)



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